

Mr. Chairman, members of the Commission, thank you for the opportunity to present testimony on the California Performance Review. I will focus on an issue that cuts across CPR recommendations on Resource Management and Public Safety -- separating out the fire protection functions of the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection and placing them in a new Department of Public Safety and Homeland Security.

The Wilderness Society vigorously opposes the proposed restructuring of the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection. While we unquestionably recognize and salute the fire protection elements of CDF, it is poor public policy to wall off fire protection from forest management. Indeed today, many activities in land and resource management directly affect fire protection, fire risk, fire hazard, and fire behavior. This is particularly true in the forestry arena – where many day-to-day management actions and programs either impact or exacerbate the fire management challenge, or they are directly oriented around reducing fire risk through appropriate vegetation treatments.

Living with fire is a fact of life in California. Over the millennia, fire has helped create and maintain the very landscapes that are California. Moreover, fire was purposely and quite skillfully used as an important tool by many California Indian tribes in shaping their environment.

And yet, despite this long relationship, Californians still struggle in their attempts to coexist with fire. Public education about fire safe living is critically important. Just as important, yet even more challenging, is the task of educating a burgeoning, urbanized population about the beneficial aspects of fire. Fire in California is at once friend and foe. Indeed, all fire isn't "wildfire." The right kind of fire, in the right place, at the right time is necessary and beneficial. Consider the following statement from the California Fire Plan:

“Fire is a necessary part of California’s natural ecosystems. It is a caretaker of the landscape, contributing to ecosystem health by thinning forests, removing decayed growth, and preparing seed beds so that new plants can grow and support wildlife.”

Accordingly, as we have learned more about the role of fire, we have seen a shift in thinking about how we approach fire. Today, fire management is a much more comprehensive endeavor – best captured by the contrast between two different paradigms -- fire management and fire control.

The National Fire Plan, the Western Governor’s Comprehensive Wildland Fire Strategy, the California Fire Plan, and the Healthy Forests Restoration Act all recognize the need for a comprehensive approach to fire management, as well as the role of fire in maintaining healthy, functioning ecosystems and in reducing accumulated fuel loads.

Let’s face it. Smokey Bear was a great American icon. Nonetheless, the policies he promoted have resulted in unintended consequences – most significantly of which has been the increased risk of severe wildfires because of the unnatural fuel loads created by removing the essential role of fire burning under natural fire regimes and regular fire return intervals.

Therefore, the proposed restructuring of CDF and the separation of fire from resource management flies in the face of fundamental realities about the role of fire. Worse, the proposed restructuring could validate and institutionalize an outmoded and archaic view of fire in California.

Please, don’t get me wrong. The presence of homes and communities demand that we always maintain a vigorous and effective fire suppression apparatus – in the air and on the ground. And that is something CDF does very well. But it is just as true that we need to return fire to many ecosystems and we need to use fire to manage fire. In other words, the future lies in a comprehensive approach to fire management, ranging from full and immediate suppression to prescribed burning and wildland fire use.

My greatest fear is that the proposed restructuring of the California Department of Forestry will turn the clock back on everything we have learned about how to live with and manage fire in the Golden State.

If CDF is fragmented into two organizations, I am gravely concerned that fire suppression will become the dominant response to fire in California at the direct expense of failing to recognize and develop comprehensive fire management strategies, including reversing the unintended consequences of removing fire from even remote landscapes, for far too long.

Walling fire protection off from the resource management functions of the department will in itself, lead to unintended consequences. Consequences that can and must be avoided by continuing to combine fire management, forest management, land use, fire protection, and resource policy in a comprehensive and integrated department.

My final concern involves the proposal to eliminate the Board of Forestry. The Wilderness Society opposes this recommendation. And it certainly will not result in cost savings or efficiency. Members of the Board of Forestry are paid only \$100 per day and the Board itself has no budget allocation or line item in the CDF budget. Eliminating the Board will simply transfer to CDF the responsibility and costs associated with developing policy.

Thank you.



THE WILDERNESS SOCIETY

**TESTIMONY OF JAY THOMAS WATSON, DIRECTOR OF THE
WILDERNESS SOCIETY'S WILDLAND FIRE PROGRAM, BEFORE THE
CALIFORNIA PERFORMANCE REVIEW COMMISSION
SEPTEMBER 17, 2004
CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, FRESNO
FRESNO, CALIFORNIA**

Mr. Chairman, members of the Commission, thank you for the opportunity to present testimony today on the natural resource management recommendations set forth in the California Performance Review. While The Wilderness Society is interested in a number of the recommendations concerning resource management, my testimony today will focus on an issue that cuts across the Resource Management and Public Safety elements of the CPR -- the proposal to separate out the fire protection functions of the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection and move them into a new Department of Public Safety and Homeland Security.

Unfortunately, The Wilderness Society cannot support this recommendation and is steadfastly opposed to this restructuring. While we unquestionably recognize and salute the fire protection elements of CDF, we believe it is poor public policy to wall off fire protection from resource management, as the two are inextricably linked. Indeed today, many activities in land and resource management directly affect fire protection, fire risk, fire hazard, and fire behavior. This is particularly true in the forestry arena -- where many day-to-day management actions and programs either impact or exacerbate the fire management challenge, or they are directly oriented around reducing fire risk through appropriate vegetation treatments.

Living with fire is a fact of life in California. From the chaparral and coastal sage of southern California, to the forests of the Sierra Nevada, and from the Douglas fir forests of the northwest corner of the state, to the oak woodlands and grasslands so prevalent throughout the state, the presence of fire in the Golden State is an inescapable reality. Over the millennia, fire has helped create, shape, and maintain the very landscapes that are California. Moreover, fire was purposely and quite skillfully used as an important tool by any number of California Indian tribes in shaping their environment.

And yet today, despite this long and inextricable relationship, Californians still struggle in their attempts to coexist with fire. Public education about fire safe living is critically important. Just as important, but even more challenging is the task of educating a burgeoning, urbanized population about the beneficial aspects of fire. Fire in California is at once friend and foe. All fire isn't "wildfire." The right kind of fire, in the right place, at the right time is necessary and beneficial.

And that isn't just The Wilderness Society speaking. Consider the following statements regarding fire in California.

"California's forest and rangeland vegetation grows in a Mediterranean climate with cool, moist winters and hot, dry summers. The combination of vegetation, climate, and topography creates a "world class" fire environment. Fire is a necessary part of California's natural ecosystems. It is a caretaker of the landscape, contributing to ecosystem health by thinning forests, removing decayed growth, and preparing seed beds so that new plants can grow and support wildlife."

Source: "Overview of the California Fire Plan", CDF Website

"Fire remains a major natural force in California. It is not a matter of "if" a fire will burn, it is "when". Therefore, it is important for Californians to understand that living in California means learning to live with fire."

Source: "Overview of the California Fire Plan", CDF Website

"Wildfire and prescribed fire (purposely set fire) have a dual role in California. Wildfire can destroy valuable resources and degrades quality of life. However, fire can also provide an essential ecological function by cycling nutrients, modifying habitat for wildlife, and increasing forest health by decreasing woody material, thus making forests less susceptible to unnatural fire severity, pest, disease, drought, and pollutant stresses."

**Source: "Forest and Range 2003 Assessment"
The Resources Agency**

Accordingly, as we have learned more about the role of fire, we have seen a shift in thinking about how we approach fire. Today, fire management is a much more comprehensive endeavor – best captured by the contrast between two different paradigms -- fire management and fire control.

This shift is unmistakable. The National Fire Plan, the Western Governor's Association Comprehensive Wildland Fire Strategy, the California Fire Plan, and the Healthy Forests Restoration Act all recognize the need for a comprehensive approach to fire management, as well as the role of fire in maintaining healthy, functioning ecosystems, and in reducing accumulated fuel loads and the fire danger they present.

Let's face it. Smokey Bear was a truly great American icon. Nonetheless, the policies he promoted have resulted in serious, unintended consequences – most significantly of which has been the increased risk of severe wildfires because of the unnatural fuel loads created by removing the essential role of fire burning under natural fire regimes and regular fire return intervals.

Therefore, the proposed restructuring of CDF and the separation of fire from resource management flies in the face of fundamental realities about the role of fire. Worse, the proposed restructuring could validate and institutionalize an outmoded and archaic view of fire in California.

Please, don't get me wrong. The presence of homes and communities demand that we always maintain a vigorous and effective fire suppression apparatus – in the air and on the ground. And that is something CDF does very well. But it is just as true that we need to return fire to many ecosystems and we need to use fire to manage fire. In other words, the future lies in a comprehensive approach to fire management, ranging from full and immediate suppression to prescribed burning and wildland fire use.

My greatest fear is that the proposed restructuring of the California Department of Forestry will turn the clock back on everything we have learned about how to better live with and manage fire in California. If CDF is fragmented into two organizations, I am gravely concerned that fire suppression will become the dominant response to fire in California at the direct expense of failing to recognize and develop comprehensive fire management strategies including reversing the unintended consequences of removing fire from even remote landscapes for far too long.

An additional concern lies in the leadership of CDF to help coordinate and assist communities in developing fire-protection plans for communities at risk of wildfire. This work is based on the California Fire Plan, the National Fire Plan, and the recently passed Healthy Forests Restoration Act. Many community protection plans are being developed, in part due to the leadership of CDF and its specialists in fire suppression, vegetation management and landscape analysis. I am concerned that the proposed restructuring of could severely inhibit the ability of CDF to lead and support community fire-protection planning work.

My final concern involves the proposal to eliminate the Board of Forestry. The Wilderness Society opposes this recommendation. It will make the process of creating regulations less accessible to the public and would likely result in weaker regulations and degradation of the state's forest resources. And it certainly will not result in cost savings or efficiency. Members of the Board of Forestry are paid only \$100 per day and the Board itself has no budget, i.e., it has no separate budget allocation and no line item in the CDF budget. Eliminating the Board will simply transfer to CDF the responsibility and costs associated with developing policy. Moreover, the proposal to replace it with an ad hoc committee appointed as needed by the Resources Secretary is again poor public policy and will create great potential for a biased one-sided policy crafted without public participation and transparency.

In closing, the proposed restructuring of the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection will lock in an archaic and discredited view of fire. A comprehensive approach to fire management is critically important. Walling fire protection off from the resource management functions of the department will in itself, lead to unintended consequences. Consequences that can and must be avoided by continuing to combine fire management, forest management, land use, fire protection, and resource policy in a comprehensive and integrated department.

Thank you.